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Remarks of The Secretary of State
Colin L. Powell
to the
Special Session of the General Assembly of the Organization
of American States
April 18, 2002

We, the Inter-American Community, convene here today in Special Session to underscore our strong support for the people of Venezuela and for their 44-year democracy.

We condemn the blows to constitutional order that Venezuela has suffered. We look to the legal authorities of Venezuela to hold accountable all who violated the law both before and during the recent crisis. And we call upon President Chavez to follow with deeds his new pledges of national reconciliation and respect for democratic principles.

The crisis in Venezuelan democracy that brings us to this Special Session did not begin last week. It built and deepened over many months. President Chavez's actions were deeply polarizing. He and his supporters insulted the Catholic Church, they alienated the business community, and they systematically attempted to intimidate political rivals, organized labor and the press.

There is no justification for any government to prevent its citizens from exercising their fundamental rights. That said, there can be no justification for any element in society, however aggrieved, to usurp a democratically elected government.

This is the era in our hemisphere of democracies, not dictatorships, of constitutions, not coup d'etats. Coups are a thing of the past, not a pathway to the future.

In a democracy, no one can be above, or outside of, the rule of law. Democracies do not remain democracies for long if elected leaders use undemocratic methods. And when people defend democracy by resorting to undemocratic means, they can destroy it.

If the people of Venezuela are to succeed in building better lives for themselves and better futures for their children, their political leaders now must come together to resolve problems constructively and constitutionally.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
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My country welcomes President Chavez's calls for a national dialogue. We also note that he has said this is a time for reconciliation, not retaliation. For calm, not hate. A time to respect differences and reflect on mistakes. President Chavez can lead his country out of this crisis by heeding his own words.

But it is not only the people of Venezuela who must reflect on and learn from what happened there. The United States must do so as well, as must all of Venezuela's neighbors and partners in democracy. All of us must all examine what we did and didn't do and what we could have done better to support Venezuelan democracy. We must do this not just for Venezuela's sake, but for all our sakes, because the consolidation of democracy in our hemisphere is profoundly important to all of us -- to our freedom, our prosperity, our security.

We, Venezuela's hemispheric neighbors and partners in democracy, owe it to the people of Venezuela, and to ourselves, to help them recover from the current crisis. We must help them address its underlying causes and strengthen their democratic institutions so that the depredations that their democracy has suffered are never repeated in Venezuela or anywhere else in our hemisphere.

In this effort, our Inter-American Democratic Charter and the democratic principles it enshrines must be our guide. We must work together with the Venezuelans to advance human rights and fundamental freedoms. Together, we must promote a pluralistic system of political parties and organizations in Venezuela. And all of Venezuela's state institutions must be subordinate to legally constituted civilian authority.

In keeping with the letter and spirit the Democratic Charter, I propose that this Assembly mandate our Secretary General to facilitate the searching national dialogue within Venezuela for which President Chavez has called. And I hope that the people and government of Venezuela will accept the Secretary General's offer of his good offices.

Let us act today to put our Democratic Charter to work for the people of Venezuela.